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Season to Taste

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 Limited Information
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No video this week, no dulcet tones to soothe a savage breast or quench a multimedia thirst. But before we get into this week's low-tech topic, I'd like to give the results of the video experiment, and how the format may be integrated into weeks ahead.

First off, speaking of visceral, people really have opinions on this video walkthrough thing. Responding parties either loved the idea and execution, loved the idea but didn't like the execution, or did not care for any part of the video presentation. Reactions alone made us Wizards media folk happy in going forward on the presentation, technical issues notwithstanding (more on that in a bit). Video is a pervasive format these days; knowing that people will not be *bored* by its introduction to the column, one way or another, is great information. To anyone who thinks emails or forum posts don't get read, please disabuse yourself of the notion. As far as this web site is concerned, what the readers say absolutely matters.

The benefit of using video, theoretically, is more information that gets passed along. As much as we try to give the essence of the game and its subtleties in recaps and mock-ups and other texty adventures, there is no substitute for the real thing. I received many, many emails saying last week's column was their favorite, their learning had gone to a new level, etc. Speaking for myself, that is gratifying to hear. And the quantity of email showed the sentiments were not isolated—so much so that it would be silly to ignore the evidence and never tackle the format again.

And yet those technical issues, and the responses that generated, were also not would you would call isolated. I was okay moving forward with the presentation, low-quality audio and visual components though they were, because one has to start somewhere. Having breached the medium, I'd be dismayed if we did it exactly the same the second time. There's room to grow and I don't think another video would be released here until we took care of that. I'm not worried about getting some of those issues resolved, but it's not going to happen overnight.

There were little things too. Not every visitor to the web site is a native English speaker; audio content is simply more difficult to pace than text. In addition, some folk don't have the technical capabilities to download and view the material. If these groups deserve to be punished for their situations, and I really don't see why they should be, it certainly should not happen often.

So will video ever return to these hallowed internet walls? Almost certainly, but not right away and not too often. There are technical kinks to work out, and exclusionary content is no fun for the excluded. But the sheer support the format does have, as well as its potential for new ways communicate, are too impressive to ignore. I'm looking forward to trying again in the future, but that's then. This week's topic is a little more down to Earth. Today the topic is cooking.

Cooking?

Yeah you know, ingredients, heat, time. Cooking, it turns out, is both fun and satisfying. It intersects two very important areas: a creative outlet and a source of food. It's a fun little hobby, and once in a while you strike gold. But what, you may ask, does this have to do with **Magic**? We're getting there.

Recipes often have a little direction in there: "season to taste," and if they don't it's implied. When I was just starting to get a hang on the material, this was a very ambiguous direction. Not knowing precisely what was being asked, I'd throw salt in the direction of the stove and hoped everything worked out. Not the best idea. Adding salt was rarely *awful*, unless one was making ice cream soup, but it wasn't what the recipe was actually directing and it certainly wasn't reliably making anyone's food taste as good as possible. Months later, it was explained to me that the important part of "season to taste" was not the "season" part but the "taste." Specifically, one should taste one's food. A lot. Constantly, all the time. If it's not tasting right, do something to make it work. Add some salt, add some pepper, cook a sauce down; whatever it takes. When you're cooking you're in complete control. Is the connection becoming more evident?

Culinary Adventures

Many simple meals can be enhanced with easy additions. For example, try some frozen stir fry veggies in your next pot of ramen noodles. Or cilantro and lime juice in your next serving of rice. Or heavy whipping cream in your daily cup of coffee. What culinary adventures will you embark on?

The process of drafting is basically like cooking, or sculpting, or painting, or writing, or any other process of creation you can imagine. You've got a palette, what you've made so far, and you as the master (chef) have to decide what is needed *right now* to make your creation perfect.

Here's a simple example. What's the best card to take out of this pack?

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There would be some debate, but everyone would have an answer in their head as the best card to take. But what if this was actually pack 2? The answer might shift, right? Let's assume you like **Nameless Inversion** here. But you've drafted a deck with two Merrow Rejereys and two **Judge of Currents**. Still like **Nameless Inversion**? Maybe **Summon the School** plays better. Perhaps you've drafted a Merfolk deck, but you have some **Drowner of Secrets** and **Streambed Aquitects** instead. And of course those **Mothdust Changelings** are coming soon. Maybe **Fallsowage** is the right pick?

The idea that you can see a pick halfway through a draft and be able to sight the right card is a gross oversimplification. It's not "What's the best pick out of this booster?" it's "Assuming you've passed these 105 cards on the first rotation, and have been passed these colors' cards, and you have the impression the people on your right are avoiding color X, and feel your deck is going to end up in style Y, what card gives the highest percentage chance of doing maximum good?" But I guess that's not as pithy. Even if you assume every scenario is pack 1, pick 1 and forgo the pass / passed stuff, people *still* vehemently disagree on the right call. Adding in those variables makes things even more complex. That complexity is where the trouble starts.

People, as a rule, like to take shortcuts. This is not an issue per se, and it's hard to fight human nature regardless. Things become problematic when shortcuts interfere with effective strategies. Not all shortcuts are bad of course; who doesn't use a card's art or name to remember its entire text? No need to read every line every time, we use shortcuts to help out. But sometimes those shortcuts can lead us to trouble, like when we start creating little maxims like "Never pass a **Mirror Entity**" or "Always grab a sideboard card before hate drafting." At the core these are fine ideas, but those "always" and "never" words rankle. It's not too hard to come up with corner cases for any "bad" play you can imagine. The rarity of a play or a pick does not overcome its possibility. In Limited, people seem awfully fond of the shortcut of lists, pick orders, clichés, and so on. Well, I love that stuff too; making lists is an excellent jumping off point to talk about archetypes and relativistic power levels with other like-minded people. It's totally fun to gab **Magic** strategy, nor does it hurt your skills. Trouble comes when people rely on the formulae as canon. They're a great start, but not particularly useful when you're in the thick of it. For that, it's good old-fashioned observation and deduction.

Let's say I'm making this guacamole, and the recipe calls for some jalapeño and its seeds. I know a lot of the capsaicin is in the seeds and I also know that I don't like my food particularly spicy. (I also know you shouldn't rub your eyes after cutting up spicy peppers. NO.) I could blindly follow the recipe and have something that's acceptable, but we can and should do better. A more effective method is constantly tasting the guac as its blending, adding spice until it gets to the right stage. Too spicy? That's okay, we can add sour cream and bring it back to milder levels. I've got a goal in mind, and while the recipe is helpful, it does not adjust itself to my needs. Only one person can do that.

For the friends who like shortcuts, here's the barest you can receive. When you're drafting a deck, what are your weaknesses and where are your strengths? Another oversimplification, but if you at least think about those ideas in the midst of a draft, it's far better than nothing at all. Of the two it's difficult to say which of them is more important. In reality, you should be aiming to cover both. Incidentally, this is why the changelings are so good in *Lorwyn / Morningtide* Limited. Changelings tackle every tribal need at once, while opening up potential new avenues of attack for later picks. Especially for the new class cards, which are very powerful but a little hard to predict, changelings give you great cover. Frankly though, if you can identify where you're strong and where you're weak on a regular basis, you probably reflect on these things already. Let's break it down further. Here's a sampling of factors to consider for each and booster.

Mana Curve

My favorite. Bar none, there's no other concept that pervasively affects my drafting as much as my deck's mana curve. It's that important. From the first pick on, it's reflected in my picks, and if I need to ignore it once, I'm going to pay double attention after. The only decks I label as "disasters" are those with shoddy mana curves, as opposed to decks with no removal or bombs or the like (although those are annoying).



I'm sure by this point the readers are aware of why a strong curve is so important in Limited, but just to give the capsule explanation: a mana curve lets you defend or attack as needed. Without a curve you're relying on raw luck or shoddy opponents, neither of which are known for showing up reliably.

I don't need to keep costs low, I just need to balance out the high stuff with the medium stuff with the cheap stuff. Skewing the latter two is not the worst situation in the world, but a deck pregnant in high-end cards is fatal. If it looks like your deck is getting flush, start doing whatever is necessary to turn the ship around. Now admittedly there are conflicting factors at work here. One does draft with other needs besides strong mana, as we'll see in a sec. For enjoyment's sake alone, high-mana cards are almost always more fun. The trick is not to cut them out, just be extra-aware of your deck's late game. Once it's taken care of, it's taken care of. There is absolutely a ceiling to the number of high-mana / tricky-mana cards to play. Off the top of my head, I would usually (but not always!) try to have no more than six 5+ mana cards in the deck, and even that is often pushing it. I cannot over-emphasize how important this awareness is while drafting.

Threats / Removal

By contrast, this is far less important to take active control of. I put the two together because both are good at dealing damage to your opponent, but technically there's a cap on removal cards, but not threats. I say this is less important to be aware of because your early picks are generally centered on this class of cards, a.k.a. the best cards in your deck. Besides that, the highest-powered threats are usually in the high end of mana, which means if people are drafting correctly, you can scoop powered creatures when the time is right. While both are fine cards, it's not that difficult to pick up an **Oakgnarl Warrior** or **Floodchaser** as needed.

However, that is not to say you can totally ignore this part of the draft. When someone is just starting out, the "high power = high pick" mentality is the natural instinct. Oakgnarl looks potent, while **Elvish Branchbender** looks random and weak. But there comes a point in that player's development when the mode shifts, when it gets pounded in their head that fatty fat Treefolk is the sucker's play, and the real champs pick cheap stuff and tricks. Then you start to get leads like multiples of **Kithkin Healer** and **Triclopean Sight** and even **Elvish Branchbender**. These are fine cards to bind a deck together, but are not exactly power players. I've certainly had decks in my life where, after laying them out, I cannot for the life of me figure out how the deck is going to win. It stays alive really well, and it's got plenty of card advantage, it just doesn't go anywhere. This is an annoying spot to be in, and it's fairly correctable. If it looks like your deck is heading down the path of thumb twiddling, start going out of your way to get some victory condition. If that means doing something odd like splashing for **Benthicore** or **Meadowboon** or even **Titan's Revenge** if required, so be it. You don't need many of these types of cards, but you gotta have something.

Tricks

Again with contrast, tricks are good for maintaining the status quo, but they rarely win the game on their own. Still, tricks are necessary for keeping your opponent on their toes, giving you options, and generally injecting some fun plays into your deck. No offense to **Onslaught** block, but I find nineteen-creature decks a little dull. No matter how good a creature is on paper, a deck has diminishing returns on creature count. You need some guys, quite a few in fact. But start creeping over the 17+ mark, and your deck turns very one-dimensional. **Earthbrawn** or even **Blades of Velis Vel** add maturity to what would otherwise be a **Portal** experience. It's not impossible to win with all creature decks by any means,

Roasted Red Potatoes(pictured)

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
Take a quantity of baby red potatoes and slice them in half.
Liberally toss with olive oil, salt, pepper, paprika, and any other flavorings you enjoy.
Put potatoes in roasting vessel and place in over for 20-25 minutes.

but you are removing opportunities for your opponent to misplay. Opponent mistakes are another topic altogether, but suffice to say the more flexibility you give yourself, the more chances you have of trapping the opponent somewhere they don't want to be.

Synergy

Now we start getting to the material that migrates the talented people forward. Synergy, an especially relevant topic in this tribal block, is the function of how well your cards work cohesively. The classic gestalt line suggests your deck should be more than the sum of its cards.

How do you know you're drafting synergistically? In this block, it's when you can give your deck a title. "I'm with black-red Goblins" sounds much better than "I'm red-black with some Elementals, a few Treefolk, and maybe a splash for *Æthersnipe*." A title is a powerful label in Draft, because it gives you direction. Maybe you could figure it out working backwards, but isn't seeing something titled "Smokey Elementals" a good indicator of what you're hoping to make?

Synergy is so powerful because it collectively raises the power of everything else you've drafted. Cards get these subtle little bonuses because they play well with others. A +1/+1 from a lord here, *Wellgabber Apothecary* saves the team there... You really don't need much of a collective boost before you get to out-power the opposition.

But all these bonuses get trickier to pull off because unlike those previous filters, this one requires looking to the future. A drafter trying to pull off synergy needs to evaluate not just what's been drafted so far, but what's likely to come. Of course you like to draft Rogue-Prowl, but with what you've passed, can you rely on getting what you need? Will the deck be strong enough if you do get what you need? That *Skeletal Changeling* is strong, but *Boggart Loggers* is a better prowler enabler...

There are no easy answers here, as opposed to general rules on mana balance or threat inclusion. There's also the need to be able to switch out of your plan, and the necessity of suppressing your plan as needed. For example, if your first pick is *Timber Protector*, which of these cards do you take?



You could make a perfectly reasonable argument for any of them, and it all depends which of the above factors you want to focus on for this pick. These are the kinds of situations that really demonstrate play skill. If there's a source out there that says what the right pick is here, are they right? Why?

Hate Draft

Sometimes the meal is finished, done. It needs nothing more to be correct. When that happens, you can rest, or you can start another project, or almost anything else. What you don't need to do is keep adding more to the project. That's just a waste.

So too in draft. At some point in pack 3, your deck might be done. It's not going to happen every time, and there's always room to improve, but recognizing this point is quite helpful. When your deck is finished, why not interfere with someone else's? If you literally do not need what's being offered in front of you, take something away from a future opponent. It's okay, this is the time to do it!

That being said, there are some caveats. For one, make really really sure your deck is actually finished. A miscourt on your playables could turn ugly at deckbuilding if you start defensive drafting too soon. And although you may find your 23rd card relatively early, be on the lookout for cards that materially improve the deck. The value of a hate draft is small, but it is higher than a pick that simply replaces another card of equal value. On the other hand, if a card



Yum!

provides a major jump in power, I'll pass any unpleasant card to an opponent to get one I want in my deck. The hide card feature on **Magic Online** is great for this, and I recommend active use. In fact, building your deck on the fly is great for all of these components.

Unique Situations

The final element to consider while being an active participant in your draft experience is the most difficult to apply a schema to, and by consequence, one of the most difficult and important to add to your repertoire.

There are times when a card valuation shifts wildly, from the perfect pick to completely unplayable. Occasionally a card will normally veer towards poor, but precise factors come together to make the card not just playable, but awesome. These are fairly rare opportunities, but being receptive to them can certainly tip the scales in your favor.

For example, I was recently in the process of drafting a rather shoddy red-black deck at the local game store. It had a pair of **Dreamspoiler Witches**, a pair of **Peppersmokes**, **Glarewielder**, **Profane Command**, and not much else. That's a nice foundation to a deck, but not enough to sustain what would otherwise be a nontribal, nonsynergistic concoction. The deck title would be something like "**Profane Command** + Dudes." You can decide for yourself if that's a title you want.

Near the end of pack 3, I look down and see another random red dork and **Colfenor's Plans**. Personally, I'm not particularly fond of the rare. It's awesome in Faerie decks, where you get to play spells on your turn and theirs, but in most other decks, the risks are real. It's a fine card when everyone is out of gas, but it's a hideous pull in your opening hand or when you need to lay more threats. It's not a *bad* card (although it was better when it removed the top ten cards...), I just usually go for something more consistent. But this situation seemed different enough to warrant a second look. For one, **Peppersmokes** play pretty well with the Plans, being a cheap instant that lets you find even more cards. But more relevantly was the fact this deck had trouble locking up the win. **Profane Command** wins games sure, and the **Fodder Launch** could do good work as well. The problem was that the deck would deal some early damage, and barring those two cards, sputter out. With the deck's strengths and weaknesses in mind, Plans seemed more appealing. One more burst at cards to dig for Command or **Fodder Launch**, or perhaps enough creatures to overwhelm an opponent before they stabilized. Note that it didn't really make the deck work, although **Colfenor's Plans** would eventually make the game unwinnable, the deck was pretty good at doing that anyway. Because of the unique factors with this draft, inherent in all drafts, a card I was lukewarm on suddenly rose in value, enough to be drafted over a card usually considered stronger. These situations do not happen every time, but ignoring the possibility is perilous. Don't dismiss a card simply because it hasn't worked for you in the past. Evaluate what's in front of you, and make the informed choice.



Now that we've got some ideas on paper, let's try a few scenarios. These are simple constructs, but think about card you'd take and why. Drafting requires effort, and unfortunately some speed as well. Practice now before you're at the tournament!

Assuming these are your first four cards, what do you take in the following boosters? (Note: for this exercise, ignore what's been passed already.)





First off, let's "taste" the deck. Four five-mana spells, awesome card advantage, and a lot of reliability. Technically the Pilferers synergize well together, but so far this doesn't seem like the deck that cares whether its engine has haste or not. Nope, to maximize the cards so far we're going to have to look elsewhere than the internal synergy.

The deck wants creatures, and it wants them trading with other creatures. Ideally we want creatures cheaper than the Pilferers to curve into something being dead at five mana when we cast the first gravedigger. As such, I take **Weed Strangle** out of the equation. The five mana part may be a deal breaker, but even if it wasn't, it doesn't particularly play well with the deck so far. Yes, it lets us kill a creature that we can't trade with through other means, but is it what the deck wants to do at five mana? **Weed Strangle** is a fine card in general, but it's best use to clear out a tough blocker so your *living* creatures get to keep swinging. This deck wants its creatures dying as much as possible! Anytime a guy trades with something else we're happy, anytime a spell does we're less so. Although each pick offers something here, because the deck's curve is high and we want creatures to throw away, I'd look towards **Elvish Harbinger**. Feel free to disagree of course, but I hope the argument is better than "X is better than Y."





A little more complex. While this scenario looks similar to the previous one, there are some key differences. Note the anti-synergy between **Changeling Hero** and **Warren Pifferers**. One wants as many creatures in play as possible, the other wants them super dead. Of course **Shriekmaw** is in the middle; Shrieky loves to be championed about as much as it loves to be returned from the grave.

This one comes down even more to personal choice, but I'll go through my thought processes were I to face something similar. Right off the bat, **Changeling Hero** is gone. It costs five, and there's an upper limit to champion creatures. The first one was great, the second one was great, the third would be awful. Clearly, things change. In addition, the Balloonist would not be considered. Like **Caterwauling Boggart** from before, it's a fragile creature that's not particularly good at trading. That's about the worst intersection of factors for the deck so far, despite the obvious appeal of 4/4 flying lifelinkery. Next on the block would be **Footbottom Feast**, despite its excellent mana synergy with **Shriekmaw**. Unless that's the exact progression, this deck really wants to play creatures as often as possible, including the third turn. Late game, the Feast does good things, but so does the rest of the deck. **Makeshift Mannequin** is really close for me; all four cards play well with it in some manner. Again though, it's only brutal with **Shriekmaw**, as the late game is still in great shape. I wouldn't fault anyone for the pick, but this deck's needs seem apparent to me, and Makeshift doesn't address them. The choice between the Harbinger and Avian is very close, but I would grab **Avian Changeling**. It's not flashy, but the **Avian Changeling** is welcome in every white deck. The ability to search out a Hero or Pifferers when you're saturated with them is weaker; the deck is likely to draw one anyway. It's a judgment call of course, but this deck could go fairly aggressive. The **Avian Changeling** would help with that plan more than a 2/1 for three.

The culmination of all these factors is ideally a sense of proactivity. You have a goal on the horizon, and you need to make the necessary adjustments to stay on track. There is no doublechecking old plans when you're on the draft side. The only guideposts available are the cards you've seen so far. Make adjustments as you see fit, because you need to stay the course and cross that finish line. The food metaphor shtick may be exhausted. How about *The Oregon Trail*?



The Oregon Trail Metaphor

The Oregon Trail is a computer game that came out in the mid 80s and, sorry MTGO and the Internet, is probably the greatest digital creation of our time. (Incidentally, hyperbole is the strongest literary device in the history of the universe.) Anyway, *The Oregon Trail*, for those who

haven't had the pleasure, consists of a player taking on the role of a banker and purchasing and hunting their way across the Pacific Northwest. Along the way, you and your party encounter rivers, historical landmarks, rivers, forts, outposts, and rivers. Your party is remarkably vulnerable to injury and disease along the way, including measles, broken limbs, the Plague, and everyone's favorite, dysentery. At the end of the game you come across one last hurdle. Believe it or not, it's a river. Unlike the other rivers in the game where you pay a former local to ferry you across, this one requires your own skill to navigate. The wagon is set on a flowing river, and it's up to you to avoid the rocks and banks as you coast your wagon to the finish line. You are always moving towards your objective, you just need to make adjustments along the way.

Similarly, your draft goal is simple. Get the best deck possible, and make the necessary course corrections to do so. Don't ignore what's in front of you, but don't feel bound by anything other than what's best for your deck *right now*. Figure out what the deck requires, and take it. Keep doing the analysis for every pick, every time and you should see a real boost in deck strength. Good luck, and enjoy the introduction of *Morningtide* to the **Magic** universe. Thanks for reading.

Dysentery

You do not want dysentery.

Source: [Wikipedia](#)



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